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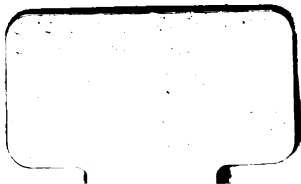
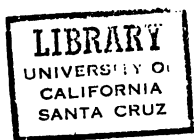
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THE VIRGIN GODDESS

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THE VIRGIN GODDESS

A TRAGEDY

By
RUDOLF BESIER



LONDON
J. M. DENT & CO.
29 & 30 BEDFORD STREET, W.C.
1907

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TO
LILY BRAYTON

NOTE

It is hardly necessary to say that *The Virgin Goddess* is not strictly modelled on the Attic drama. It was written for performance on the modern stage, and should be judged as an acting play, not as a literary *tour de force*.

In compliance with our stage conventions the curtain descended twice during the performance.

R B.

CHARACTERS

[The action takes place in the marble courtyard before the Temple of Artemis.]

<i>Cresphontes</i>	.	.	.	King of Artis.
<i>Althea</i>	.	.	.	The Queen.
<i>Cleito</i>	.	.	.	The King's Mother.
<i>Hephæstion</i>	.	.	.	The King's Brother.
<i>Iphicles</i>	.	.	.	A Captain.
<i>The Virgin</i>	.	.	.	Priestess of Artemis.
<i>A Herald</i>			<i>Priest</i>	<i>Attendant</i>

*The Chorus, Virgins, Warriors, Priests and
Citizens of Artis.*

The Virgin Goddess was produced on 23rd October 1906, by Mr.
Otho Stuart at The Adelphi Theatre.

THE VIRGIN GODDESS

The marble courtyard before the Temple of Artemis. In the background L. to C. a broad flight of steps leading to the temple. In front of the temple door is a statue of Artemis with an altar before it. A flight of steps leading to the king's palace R. Deep blue sky and brilliant sunshine.

[Three Warriors stand about the steps leading to the temple door. Almost immediately the curtain goes up two Warriors rush in.]

1st Warrior. Iphicles hath returned, and seeks the Queen.

2nd Warrior. *[One of them standing about the steps]*
Iphicles! *[They evince excitement.]*

1st Warrior. Even he. Last night he crept
Through the besiegers to the eastern wall
And clomb into the city all unscathed.
He beareth urgent news. Where is the Queen?

Other Warriors. What news? What news?

1st Warrior. News of our vanished army.
[Tremendous excitement. They rush up to the new-comers.]

A Warrior. Now praise the gods!

Another Warrior. Are they alive, our men?

Another Warrior. Return they?

Another Warrior. Are they dead?
1st Warrior. He will not speak
His tidings save unto the Queen alone.

[*Iphicles enters accompanied by two Warriors.*]

The Warriors. Iphicles, hail !

A Warrior. The news?

Another Warrior. Are they alive?

Iphicles. My news is for the Queen. Go tell her thou
Iphicles hath returned.

[*Exit a Warrior.*]

A Warrior. We deemed, my friend,
That weary of our city and our King,
Thou hadst deserted to the rebels.

Iphicles. [*Indignantly*] What!
Ye dared impute such infamy to me?
Obedient to command I left the city
On perilous quest, the which I have fulfilled.
Ye deemed I had deserted ! Are ye mad ?

[*While he is speaking the sound of singing comes from the distance.*]

What song is that ?

A Warrior. The King hath doffed his arms
For priestly robes—

Iphicles. [*With a sneer*] Befits him well !

The Warrior. —And now
With ceremony to the temple goes,
There to instal before the inmost shrine
Of Artemis three virgins robed in white—

As is our custom in the hour of peril—
And at the shrine must these abide in prayer
Until the holy goddess speak her will.

Iphicles. [*Drawing two of the Warriors in front of him*]
Make not my presence known unto Cresphontes,
Ere I have spoken with the Queen.

A Warrior. 'Tis well.

[The Chorus of seven Youths and seven Maidens, all robed in white, file singing on to the stage, down the palace steps, youths and maidens alternately. They are followed by seven Priests and three Virgins, the rear being brought up by Cresphontes, who bears a naked sword lying flat across his hands. The Chorus, singing all the while, form a wide semi-circle about the statue, the Priests form up at the temple door, and the Virgins come to a stand between the statue and altar and facing the audience. Cresphontes pauses before the altar and facing the statue.]

CHORUS OF YOUTHS.

[As they move up the stage.]

Long since a shepherd on the lonely hills
Of Arcady beheld in waking dream,
Parting with silver feet the daffodils
That fringed his highland stream,
And followed by her nymphs in fluttering race,
And with wild light upon her face,
Immortal beauty out of moonlight wrought,
Artemis armed and sandalled for the chase.

THE VIRGIN GODDESS

CHORUS OF MAIDENS.

[As they move up the stage]

Singing wild songs that glimmering revel passed
Into the forest and were lost to him ;
But fired with deathless love he followed fast
Through haunted woodlands dim,
And down still glens that only hunters know,
And over peaks of ancient snow,
And where the torrents of the mountain hurl
Thunder and foam unto the plain below.

CHORUS OF YOUTHS.

O fleet his feet, but fleeter far was she
Whose face had lured him from the mountain side,
And by the margin of the alien sea,
He failed at last and died ;
And the wild people of the shore that came
To tend his spirit's dying flame,
Caught from his tongue strange rumours of a dream
And mystic loveliness without a name.

CHORUS OF MAIDENS.

And where he died there rose our city white
And lovely as her face for whom he died,
And in the gracious favour of her sight
We grew in power and pride,
And gathered lordly wealth from far away,
And palms of glory from the fray ;
We sent our spears abroad, and fought and won,
And many cities passed beneath our sway.

CHORUS OF YOUTHS AND MAIDENS.

[*They sing, raising imploring hands to the statue.*]

But now upon the ridge of night we stand,

With unrelenting menace at our gate,

And cry in vain for thy sustaining hand

And for thy counsel wait.

O tender healer of the wounded deer !

O Refuge for all things in fear !

Forsake us not in this the hour of need,

O Virgin Goddess, hear !

[*At the last time they all sink on their knees and remain thus during Cresphontes' prayer, their hands outstretched to the statue.*]

Cresphontes. Goddess, who lendest no unwilling ear

To the lone cry of forest things pursued,

The cornered wolf, the stricken hind, O hear !

For we, thy children, on the perilous edge

Of ruin call upon thee as of old

We called on thee, nor ever called in vain.

Then with wise counsel or with sudden hand

Didst thou repel the foeman and defend

Thy virgin city from his ravishing sword.

Lo now, in this extreme of agony

Wilt thou withhold thy counsel and thine aid ?

Have we failed aught in reverence ? From thy shrines

Have not the winds borne sweetest smoke to thee

And solemn litanies and silver hymns ?

Hail, then, and hearken for we can no more,

And lift thy hand before the doom descend !

*[He tends the altar, and a thick smoke rises.
Meanwhile Althea enters hurriedly and
looks anxiously about her.]*

Althea. [*Half aside*] Iphicles . . .

Iphicles. [*In a low voice*] Queen!

Althea. [*In a whisper*] Hephæstion, hath he come?

Iphicles. [*As before*] He cometh!

Althea. [*With intense relief*] Ah—I praise the gods—nay,
hush!

No word of this . . .

Cresphontes. Goddess, behold I come,
Crushed and despairing, to thy holiest place
To offer thee as bitter sacrifice
This sword that never yet failed in the field,
But now upon the brink of doom seems reft
Of power to save.

[He lays the sword with ceremony on the altar.]

Iphicles. [*To Althea*] But other news I bring.
I fear our host hath perished out at sea.

Althea. Alas! . . . This tell the King, but of Hephæstion
No word . . . And when these go, abide with
me.

Cresphontes. [*To those assembled*] Queen, and ye men of
Artis, hope that dies
Last of all gifts divine bestowed on man,
Our hope hath sickened and is nigh to death.
Those that sailed forth to wage our wars afar,
And crush the rival cities of the north,
Return not, and no tidings of their fate

Reach us ; we know not if they be submerged
Under the waves of battle or the sea.

Iphicles. [*Standing forward*]. Alas, my King! I come
with bitter news.

Cresphontes. Iphicles! . . . Whence art thou? I deemed
thee lost

Or traitor . . .

Althea. Secretly I sent him forth
To glean what news he might of our lost arms.

Cresphontes. [*Frowning*] Thy ways are strange and dark,
Althea . . . Howbeit,

He is returned . . . Speak out. What news?

Iphicles. O King,

I wandered far and gained no news at all
Save that our ships had never reached their goal.
For sundry travellers journeying from the north
Told me those cities that we swore to crush
Still tower predominant shining o'er the sea.
But wending homeward down a lonely coast,
I came upon a man half dead with fight,
'Gainst the confederate powers of wind and wave
And weariness, and looking in his face
Knew him for one of that great host of ours
That sailed long since to war—Phaon . . .

[*Great sensation.*]

He died

Clasped in my arms, and dying told his tale.
How that our ships a few brief leagues from home
Were seized by the storm and driven night and day

Across the fury of unbridled seas.
And he one night was grasped by a great wave
And dragged into the rolling waste ; but fate
Had flung a floating spar within his reach.
On this he buoyed himself and after hours
Of agony was hurled upon a shore
Whence he toiled onward starving to the place
I found him, and so died. Now many moons
Have passed since storm attacked those goodly ships.
Had they survived we surely should have heard.

[*A tragic silence.*]

Cresphontes. Alas, 'tis certain the waves cover them.

So now, ye men of Artis, hear my words.
Shorn of our strength we have lured into revolt
The states and cities vassal to our own,
And close environed by rebellious spears
And three to one outnumbered, we stand here
Helpless, and through the gates and past the guards
Pestilence crawls with famine at her heels.
I have fought and failed, and can no more, but
come

Hither to-day, no warrior but a priest,
To lead, as ancient ritual prescribes,
These virgins to the shrine of Artemis.
There shall they stand in silent prayer immersed
Until she breathe her will into their souls.
And I myself have laid aside my sword,
My father's dreadful sword of fierce renown,
And come to pray—

Althea. [*Contemptuously*] Methinks the goodlier prayer
Were to go forth all armed as a man should,
And fight as should a man !

A Warrior. The Queen speaks well.

[*Murmurs of approbation.*]

Another Warrior. Leave prayer to boys and girls.

[*Reiterated murmurs.*]

Cresphontes. What words be these ?

Think you I would not gladlier grasp my sword

And with my warriors rush on glittering death ?

The heavier task secures the costlier prize.

Althea. [*Passionately*] Ay, so you said when those that now
lie crouched

Without the city gates, like beasts of prey,

First raised their heads in insolent revolt.

The heavier task secures the costlier prize.

Then was the heavier task concession mild

And feeble pandering to their sly demands,

The costlier prize—thou hast gained the costlier
prize—

Death at their hands—dishonour—ruin. . .

Cresphontes. Enough !

Of the dead past, let Artemis be Judge.

The future is mine own, subject to fate.

A Warrior. Fate had Hephæstion, were Hephæstion here,
Closed with and overcome.

[*Shouts of approbation. Iphicles makes as though
to speak.*]

Althea. [*In a quick whisper, catching his wrist*] Be still! . . .

Cresphontes. Hephæstion
Is far away ; he has no love for home.
His city may go down into the dust—
What care to him?

Althea. A lie. You drove him forth
With bitter insults from a jealous heart.
He loved his city—but he loathed his King—
His brother—and a coward. . . .

Cresphontes. I'll not endure
To hear his name—from thy lips least of all,
Woman!

Althea. His very name is dread for thee.

Cresphontes. No more.

[*Darkly*] I have heard enough to read thy heart.

[*To the Warriors*] Do ye, each man to his allotted post

Return.

[*To the Priests*] Lead on into the temple.

[*The Priests, the Chorus, the Virgins and finally
Cresphontes pass into the temple.*]

A Warrior. [*To the Queen, who stands motionless with
averted face*] Queen,

I speak for these : do thou but give command,
And we will fling the gates apart and fall
Like a thunderbolt upon the enemy.

Warriors. Ay, speak! Command!

Althea. [*Coldly*] Did you not hear the King
Bid you to your allotted posts? . . .

[*They move uneasily away. The Queen stays them.*]

My friends,
Go : it is good to obey. But as ye go,
Take comfort. Soon may dawn the hour when one,
Whose valour not a god may quench, will lead
The ordered fury of your storming spears
Straight to their goal. . . .

A Warrior. [*As they go out*] What means the Queen?

Another Warrior. I know not.

[*Exeunt all save Althea and Iphicles.*]

Althea. At last we are alone. . . . Now tell me quick
How found you him? His words? And where
is he?

Iphicles. Under a mystery of midnight boughs
In a dreamy folding of the Arcadian hills
I met him bearing to a little shrine
An offering for the goddess of his soul.
He is a votary of Artemis,
Virgin and wholly dedicate to her,
A mighty hunter of the hills is he,
Far famed for deeds of prowess in the chase.
O Queen, I told him of our army lost,
And of Cresphontes' weak unstable rule ;
I told him of our vassals' swift revolt ;
How we were driven back by force of arms
Within the city ; of the city's plight,

Zoned all about with bright, relentless steel,
Pestilence-stricken, famine-wasted. . . .

Althea.

Ah!

Was he not moved?

Iphicles.

Nay, Queen, he laughed and said:

‘Let that fell hound, Cresphontes reap the harvest
His hand hath sown!’ And all in vain I prayed:
‘Come down and help us!’ Then I spake thy name
And told him it was thou that sent me forth.

Althea. [*In a whisper*] And then?

Iphicles.

A great light leapt into his eyes,

He flung his leopard skin about his form,
And spake no word, but bade me lead the way.
And after many days of tireless march
We reached the rebel lines. Then he with art
Most cunning passed unharmed among the foe.
I left him there to spy upon their plans
And learn their leaguered might. Before the sun
Touches the sea he swore to gain our walls.

Althea. [*Half aside*] For ten long years I have not seen
thy face,

Hephæstion. . . . How looked he, Iphicles?

Iphicles.

Bearded and vast and thewed as Heracles,
And in his motion free as mountain winds
And irresistible as mountain floods
In autumn, and his eyes are bold and pure
As are the eyes of one that knows not love.

Althea. [*Slowly*] As are the eyes of one that knows
not love. . . .

[*Cleito falters slowly down the palace steps.*]

Iphicles. [*In a low voice*] *Althea*, the mother of the King
is here.

Althea. Go then, my friend, but tell this news to none.

[*Exit Iphicles.*]

Cleito . . .

[*Goes up to her and takes her hand.*]

Thy hands are cold.

Cleito. Ay, cold, so cold

I think I never shall be warm again. . . .

Lead me into the sun I cannot see.

Althea. Thou standest in the sunshine. Art thou sick ?

Cleito. Ay, sick with apprehensions horrible.

Althea. Open thy heart, beloved.

Cleito. I must speak.

I have been silent long, now I must speak,

And warn thee of thy peril imminent—

Peril that comes in a beloved form,

And urged by fate malign.

Althea. Peril to me ?

Cleito. Home from his wanderings somewhere in the world

Hephæstion returns . . .

Althea. [*Amazea*] Hephæstion !

[*Aside*] How did she hear ?

Well, and what then ?

Cleito. What then ?—

The avalanche of gathered doom on thee.

Althea. On me ? On me ? What means this drift of
words ?

How canst thou know Hephæstion returns ?
And how should his return bring doom on me ?

Cleito. Listen. What time ten years ago you wed
The King, Hephæstion bode with us awhile,
And every night he slept within our walls
Upon my soul there crept an awful dream.
Against a blackness blacker than the night
That broods for evermore on these blind eyes
Stood robed in white and veiled a woman's form,
And all adown the whiteness of her robe,
Down to her feet, poured a bright stream of blood.
All motionless as Niobe she stood
Until that crimson torrent ceased to flow ;
Then with dead hand she raised her veil and bared
Her bosom . . . Lo, between her breasts the hilt
Of the King's sword stood out. . . . And every
night
So long as he abode within our walls
That dream returned . . . But when the hate that
lives
Between my sons brake into open strife,
And from our walls Hephæstion stormed away,
My sleep passed dreamless into morn. Last night
The dream returned. . . .

[*She buries her face in her hands.*]

Althea. But me this dream concerns not,
Even should Hephæstion return to Artis.

Cleito. The face of the dead woman and thy face
Were one.

Althea. But thou hast never seen my face.

Blind were thine eyes long, long before we met.

Cleito. And yet I know the dead face was thy face. . . .

Kneel. [*Althea kneels before her.*]

I am blind— [*Feels Althea's face*]

And yet my hands have eyes—

My hands have eyes. Not living as this face,

But like to alabaster, white and dead,

And awful in triumphant agony—

And yet thy face . . . thy face. . . .

Althea. [*Pushing Cleito's hands away and rising*]

I'll not believe it.

These be sick fancies of the fevered brain.

[*Aside*]

And yet these fancies told her that he comes,

And told her truly. . . . Ah!

[*Sound of approaching shouts.*]

Cleito. [*Rising to her feet*] What sounds be these?

Althea. [*In a whisper*] Can it be he?

[*The sound grows louder. Iphicles rushes in.*]

Iphicles. O Queen, he is here!

Althea. [*In a whisper*] So soon?

Cleito. Who spake but now?

Iphicles. I, Iphicles.

Cleito. Then tell me—

For it seems a chill wind blows upon my heart—

What mean these shouts?

Althea. [*With a sign to Iphicles*] It is thy son.

Cleito. My son?

Iphicles. That borne with jubilation hither comes.

Cleito. [*With sudden animation*] My son, the King, Cressphontes, borne along,

Triumphant out of victory returned !

They said his father's spirit in him was dead.

They lied, such lofty spirit cannot die !

Lead him to me that I may kiss his brow,

My son, the King.

[*Several Warriors rush shouting on to the stage. They form an avenue for Hephæstion, who enters, a leopard skin thrown over his head and armour. Seeing Althea he starts back and stands for a moment staring at her as though in fear. The shouting dies down into silence.*]

Althea. Thy mother calls for thee.

Hephæstion. [*Turning to Cleito*] Mother !

[*Takes her hands*]

Cleito. [*Drawing them away with a cry*] O me, what son is this ?

Althea. Hephæstion !

Hephæstion. Beloved mother, it is I.

[*Seeks to embrace her.*]

Cleito. [*Vehemently repulsing him*] Away !

The world is wide. Get hence into the world !

Put the resisting hills 'twixt thee and us,

The untravelled deserts and the lonely seas !

Go, as you love me—go !

Hephæstion. What words are these ?

What sorry greeting after many years ?

[*Takes her hands*]

Ah, but thy hands are marble cold, beloved !
Why dost thou tremble ?

Cleito. Ask me not, but go !
[*Suddenly holding his hand to her heart*]

O child, I yearn toward thee with a love
Strong as the terror which impels my tongue
To bid thee leave our city to its fate . . .
Althea, speak : beseech him to return
Into that far-off land from whence he came
To menace thee and thine. . . .

Hephæstion. From whence I came
To menace thee, Althea ? I grope in gloom.
What meaning underlies these mystic words ?

Althea. She is ill and visited with evil dreams
Which fever conjures into warnings—

Cleito. Nay—

Althea. Be still. I charge thee say no more. Thy son
Comes hither with a glorious rage inspired,
And to fulfil the purpose of the gods.
Hephæstion, speak.

Hephæstion. I come to give my arm
And brain to Artis. I am here to assist
The resurrection of her lofty name,
That now lies trampled in the shameful dust,
To avert with stubborn force the impending doom,
And wash with blood these insults from her face,
And seal the sorry breaches in our walls
With the red spoil of war. Not yours henceforth
To await behind a fence of crumbling stone,

Like cornered rats, a miserable death.
What though we be outnumbered man for man,
We are mighty in a passion for revenge,
And in the conquering worship of our land !
O now for you the broad and open field,
The shock and countershock of charging spears,
The long-drawn thunder of the earth that shudders
Under the tramp of feet and galloping hoofs ;
The glory and gloom and all the pomp and sound
Of unrelenting battle to the death.
All this my presence here in Artis means :
Hither I came to lead you forth and fight
Up to a stern and iron-crashing close.

[*Tumultuous cheers from those assembled.*]

Praise ye the Queen, for it was she whose voice
Urged me to Artis from afar.

The Warriors. [*With a great shout*] Althea !

Cleito. [*To Althea*] Is this the truth ? Did thy voice
urge him hither ?

Althea. Yes.

Cleito. Then I say no more. Let come what will,
I am resigned. We may not parry fate.

[*Exit, led by a Warrior.*]

[*A Priest enters from the temple door.*]

The Priest. The King is much in wrath and bids me learn
Wherefore ye raise these shoutings and disturb
The solemn rites within the temple.

Althea.

Tell him

We have more cause for shouts than he for prayer.

Hephæstion hath returned.

Priest. [*Amazed*] Hephæstion, thou!*Hephæstion.* Even so, my friend, 'tis I. Go tell the King
I await him here.*Priest.*

'Tis well.

[*Exit.*]*Hephæstion.*

What does the King?

Althea. Safe in the shrine of Artemis he prays

With boys and girls assembled. Lo, his sword,

Thy father's dreadful sword of fierce renown,

A sacrifice upon the altar lies!

He hath doffed his arms and donned the garb of priest.

The enemy storm our gates and crush our walls.

We starve within. He prays with boys and girls.

[*Murmurs.*]*Hephæstion.* My father's sword! [*He takes it from the altar*]

Alas, what depths we have reached!

O friends, this sword it was that made our name

Shine with prevailing glory in the world.

Once was this sword the terror of our foes

When in my father's unremorseful hand

It flashed, a very thunderbolt of Zeus!

Now in this sombre hour it lies untouched,

Harmless, neglected. Lo, the very blade

Is dull with shame!

[*Murmurs.*]*A Warrior.*

But thou canst make it clean!

Another Warrior. Take thou thy father's sword and lead
us on!

Another Warrior. We'll follow thee till death and out
beyond! [*Tumultuous shouts.*]

Hephestion. 'Tis well; but now I charge you to your posts,
There to await me. In disguise I have crept
Among the rebels and have learned their plans,
And formed mine own. Be ready; for to-night
We sally forth in quest of victory.

[*Exeunt all except Hephestion and Althea.*]

[*There is a moment's silence. Buckling his
father's sword on his thigh he approaches
her.*]

Althea, is this indeed thy face I see?

Althea. [*Looking away*] Why dost thou ask?

Hephestion. Thy face . . . so strange it seems
And like a memory of long ago . . . [*Takes her hands*]
Look at me. Dost thou still recall that hour
When first we met?

Althea. [*Drawing away her hands*] That hour when first
we met?

It was the night before my marriage morn.
I could not sleep, and rose and wandered away
By the sea-shore . . .

Hephestion. And I, approaching Artis
From seaward, came upon thee loitering
Under the moon and in the sound of waves.

Althea. Ah, how thy presence startled me—so vast
In the dim light!

Hephæstion. And like a spirit thou,
Strayed from the shadow valleys of the dead :
White was thy robe and white thy hands, and
whiter
Thy face, Althea.

Althea. My heart was full of trouble.

Hephæstion. We talked awhile and parted dreamily.

Althea. When next we met I was thy brother's wife.

[*She looks away ; a pause, then with animation*]

And then how suddenly you left the city—
Too suddenly to bid me one farewell !

Hephæstion. Yea, for I left in the white heat of wrath
Against Cresphontes. From the womb we grew
In hate together, and as the years went by,
That mutual hatred kindled more and more
Until at length it brake into wild flame
After he wed thee . . . And I left my land
For ever, as I deemed.

Althea. [*Smiling*] But thou art here.

Hephæstion. [*With sudden ardour*] Could I resist the voice
that called me home—

Thy voice, Althea? [*Touches her hand.*]

Althea. [*Drawing it away*] And all those many years
We dwelt apart how fared the world with thee?
Thou art a votary of Artemis,
A mighty hunter. Tell me all.

Hephæstion. O Queen,
How good it was to feel the long, soft winds
Breathing upon thy face from the unknown !

The enormous ocean liberty was mine,
And mine the earth, and I was free to choose.
I wandered far into the sunset gold
And far into the morn, and north and south
Revealed their secret wonders to my gaze.
But in the hills of Artemis my soul
Found home, and then my wandering feet were
still.

I built a hut for shelter from the storm,
I built a little shrine to Artemis,
And gave myself to her, and lived the life
Of a free hunter roaming in the woods,
Careless, untrammelled, unallied—a man.

Althea. [*As though to herself*] And yet more surely bound
than others. . . .

Hephæstion. I!

How so?

Althea. Art thou not bound to Artemis
With vows that only death can break?

Hephæstion. 'Tis true.

Althea. [*In a low passionate voice*] Others may taste the
sweets of human love—

Not thou. . . .

Hephæstion. [*Hoarsely, seizing her hands*] Althea!

Althea. [*In a strangled voice*] Let go my hands. . . .

[*She frees herself, and as the temple door opens
passes out up the palace steps. Enter Cres-
phontes from the temple. The brothers
regard each other silently.*]

Cresphontes. [*Harshly*] Put back
My sword.

Hephæstion. Thy sword—

Cresphontes. I tell thee put it back
Upon the holy altar where it lay.
To Artemis I sacrificed my sword.
How darest thou—

Hephæstion. I dared because I knew
Such sacrifice were loathsome in her eyes.

[*With an exclamation of fury Cresphontes advances towards him.*]

Let be. I put it back again to rest
In shame awhile, obedient to thy will.

[*In silence he goes to the altar and lays the sword upon it, then turns to Cresphontes with a sudden change of manner.*]

Nay, brother, for I come not here in wrath,
But hither drawn by deathless love I come!
Now in this hour of reconciling peril
Let us be one and burn up ancient feuds
And smouldering hatred of the sundered years
In one embracing flame of patriot love.

Cresphontes. I never sought thy hurt or crossed thy will,
Save in defence of my just right as King.
Whence art thou?

Hephæstion. From Arcadia, where I dwell,
A hunter dedicate to Artemis,
Among the hills made holy by her feet.

Cresphontes. Why art thou here?

Hephæstion. How canst thou ask? Is Artis
So safely 'stablished that her sons may roam
The world unmindful of her welfare?

Cresphontes. Ah! . . .
This sudden patriot love is strange and new
And sits upon thee well.

How came the tidings
Of our sore straits to thee?

Hephæstion. Through Iphicles.

Cresphontes. [In a changed voice] Iphicles?

Hephæstion. Well, what then?

Cresphontes. Iphicles went,
Obedience to Althea's secret word,
To search for tidings of our vanished ships.

Hephæstion. Well?

Cresphontes. And he seems among the Arcadian hills
To have sought them and—found thee.

Hephæstion. Have I denied it?
What wilt thou more?

Cresphontes. I fain would hear thee say
That Iphicles went forth without command
To seek thee.

Hephæstion. Were that then so strange?

Cresphontes. So strange
I'd not believe it. Nay, my friend, we know
It was my wife, Althea, who sent for thee.

Hephæstion. Well, and what then?

Cresphontes. O food for laughter merely!
Dost thou remember thy tremendous oath

Never again to pass within these walls?
But when Althea beckons thee, the oath
Dissolves in air, and like a faithful dog
Hephæstion returns.

Hephæstion. I am here to-day
Because I know that Artis needs a man.
Fighters there be, and priests there be who stand
Safely ensancturied and sing and pray
While others battle—but no man to lead.

Cresphontes. [*In sudden fury*] So now at length I see thy
naked soul!

Thou art come as ever in old time thou camest
To thwart my purpose and to flout my will.
Thou art the man to lead, and I to follow—
Thou to command, I to obey.

Hephæstion. Enough!

The call of Artis shall not be denied.
All through the long years of thy craven rule
I stood aside and held my peace and watched
Our city slowly from that eminence sink
On whose proud heights our father with strong toil
Raised her and many wars. She is fallen, she lies
Hard on the edge of doom because of thee.
No longer will I stand aside. She called me,
I came to raise her up, and I remain.

Cresphontes. Thou fool, dost think I cannot read thy heart,
Cloud it about in phrases as thou wilt?
It was her face that lured thee from the hills,
Her words, because they came from her—Althea.

When last thou tarriedst here I marked thine eyes
Feed on her face with hot desire . . .

Hephæstion. Thou liest !

Cresphontes. She loathed me ever and she burned for thee—
She burned for thy caressing lips and hands,
Until at length she sent for thee, and now—

Hephæstion. Revile me as thou wilt, no whit care I.
But filthy slander spat upon the Queen
I'll not endure.

Cresphontes. Then get thee gone !

[*Enter Iphicles and a Warrior.*]

Iphicles. O King,
A herald from the foe craves speech with thee.

Cresphontes. [*To himself*] What now ? . . .

[*To Iphicles*] Then bid him enter.

[*Exit the Warrior.*]

[*Enter Althea down the palace steps.*]

Iphicles. Queen, a herald
Approaches from the rebel lines.

Althea. A herald ?
What need for further parley at this hour ?

[*Enter Herald, accompanied by several Warriors.*]

Herald. [*Sees Hephæstion*] Hephæstion !

Hephæstion. Well, I know thy face, my friend.
Of old thou wast a citizen of Artis.

Herald. [*In a low voice*] And still had been with thee as
King, Hephæstion.

Cresphontes. [*To the Herald*] What is thy will ?

Herald. Cresphontes, from the spears
Leagued and confederate against thy rule
I come, the bearer of pacific words
And fair proposals.

Althea. [*Scornfully to Hephæstion*] Even as I thought !
The news hath reached them of thine advent here.
They know that Artis holds at length a man,
Whose strangling hands shall grip the throat of
Fate—
And now they fain would slink like beaten hounds
Away—

Cresphontes. Be still ! This is no time or place
For reckless boasting and the froth of spite.
[*To the Herald*] Speak on, my friend.

Herald. King, I am bidden say :
Conquest is not the goal of our resolve,
Nor hate the force that urged us to rebel.
We to the cause of liberty are vowed.
Yet little lust is ours to shed the blood
Of those that are our kindred from of old.
But since it is ordained the strong must rule,
And since we are proven in the lists of war
Stronger than you, we claim by right of strength
Lordship of all the cities 'neath thy sway,
Save Artis, where thou still mayst rule as King
And live in peace.

[*Contemptuous murmurs from the Warriors.*]

These are our just demands ;
Grant these, and we with all our spears will turn

Homeward in peace before the morrow's sun.
Refuse them, and we'll fight thee to the death.

Cresphontes. Now, friend, I praise the gods—

Hephæstion. O, praise them not
Ere yet they shower upon thee gifts for praise !

[*Approving murmurs from the Warriors.*]

Cresphontes. [*Ominously*] What mean these words ?

Hephæstion. Didst thou not hear this man
Fling down his subtle insult at thy feet ?
Shall we endure that those who in the past
Cowered in the shadow of our father's frown
Should dare—

Cresphontes. Endure—I'll not endure thy voice
Thrust into councils which concern thee not.

Hephæstion. But speak I will, and thou shalt hear my
words.

It was thy listless and reluctant rule
That lured these men into revolt who now
Lie in grim wait before our holy walls.
Behold, they dare with proffer of shameful peace
To come before thee. One reply thou hast,
And only one—

Cresphontes. And that reply is mine.

But ere I speak it take these words : The sun
Slopes westward ; ere his foot shall touch the sea
I bid thee leave these walls for evermore.
I'll brook no more thy domineering mien,
The hot and venomous hatred of thy heart,
And dark intrigue to undermine my power.

Get hence into the wilds from whence thou camest,
And never show thy face in Artis more.

[*Althea starts forward with a cry, but Hephestion restrains her. The Warriors murmur together.*]

Hephestion. Is this the end?

Cresphontes. I have spoken.

Hephestion. It is well.

Althea. [*Passionately*] Cresphontes, art thou mad? And wilt thou slay

The last hope of the city?

Cresphontes. I will shield
Artis with my protection and wise love
From ruin.

[*To the Herald*] Friend, return to those that sent thee,
And say the King accedes to their demands,
And bid them homeward turn their steps in peace.
This tell them, and farewell.

Althea. Cresphontes, not
This final shame!

Cresphontes. I have spoken.

[*To the Herald*] Go thy ways.

Herald. King, I will take thine answer with great heart
To those that wait without. Farewell. [*Exit.*]

Althea. [*In a fierce whisper to Hephestion*] Then kill him!

Hephestion. [*Under his breath*] Cresphontes?

Althea. Kill him for the city's sake.

[*In a lower voice*] Kill him for mine, beloved.

Hephestion. I will.

[*To Iphicles, covertly*] Do thou
Detain awhile the Herald at our gates.
Be swift and secret.

Iphicles. It is well. [*Exit rapidly.*]

Cresphontes. Althea,
And men of Artis, you that murmur now
At my decision in the teeth of fate,
I pardon, suffering in my pride with you.
But you will see the wisdom of my choice
In the fair days now dawning on the land.
For is not peace far lovelier than war,
And life than death? We have our city still,
The breeze is ours, the sun and moon and stars
Shine for us, and we are free to go our ways
Unhaunted by the menace of the grave;
In peaceful trust to till the patient fields,
And reap the harvest in unthinking joy.
Praise ye the goddess in your hearts, and I
Will lay my dole of thanks before her feet.

[*He goes slowly back into the temple. A silence.*]

Althea. There is one thing to do and only one.

Hephestion. And I, obedient to thy least command,
Will do it now.

[*To the Warriors*] My friends, I have detained
The Herald at our gates. He must not take
Cresphontes' word unto the rebel chiefs,
If still ye are wedded to the stern resolve
That death is fairer than this shameful peace.

[*They answer him with affirming shouts.*]

Then must I do the deed that Fate begat
Far off in the miraculous womb of time.
Straight is the path up which my feet must tread,
And crimson is the close, and out beyond
Darkness.

[*To a Warrior*] Thy sword.

Althea. Upon the altar there

Behold thy father's sword.

Hephæstion. My father's sword!

[*Goes to the altar*]

The sword Cresphontes shamed. [*Takes it.*]

'Tis well, my Queen.

Now will I wash with blood that shame away.

A Warrior. What wilt thou do?

Hephæstion. The man who was your King
Hath sold the rights of Kingship and of man.
He is no longer worthy of the sun,
And he must die.

[*He goes up steps and turns at the door of the temple.*]

Keep watch before the door,

And see that no man enter. [*Exit into the temple.*]

[*A pause. Then Althea utters a sudden cry.*]

Althea. Nay, come back!

[*She rushes towards the temple door, but is stopped by the Warriors.*]

Hephæstion, pause!

[*Seizing the spears which bar her way*]
I charge thee let me pass!

A Warrior. O Queen, no force of thine can hold him
now.

Althea. [*In a frenzy*] He must not do this deed or we
are doomed!

Make way!

A Warrior. I dare not!

Althea. We are doomed, I say!

Hephæstion, stay thy hand! Hephæstion. . . .

[*She sinks on her knees holding the spears. A
pause.* Cleito enters, faltering down the
palace steps.*]

Cleito. Althea. . . .

Althea. [*In a strangled voice, staggering to her feet*] I am
here. . . .

Cleito. Where is the King?

Althea. Within the temple

Cleito. Tell me . . . is it true?

Althea. [*In a whisper*] What?

Cleito. That a herald from the rebel lines
Came hither proffering conditions vile
Of peace?

Althea. 'Tis true.

Cleito. True. . . . But they lied who told me—
Ah, say they lied who told me that the King,
My son, embraced that proffer of shameful peace
Betraying the city.

Althea. Nay, thou hast heard the truth.

* It was at this point that the curtain descended when the play
was performed.

Cleito. [*Fiercely*] I'll not believe it. Lead me to the King.

[*Althea shrinks away from her. Cleito feels blindly arouna*]

Althea, lead me to the King.

Althea. [*In a whisper*] I cannot.

Cleito. Wherefore? [*A pause*] Wherefore?

A Warrior. Because we have command
To guard the door and see that no one enter.

Cleito. I am his mother.

A Warrior. Even so.

[*A cry is heard from the temple.*]

Althea. Ah! ah . . .

Cleito. What sound was that?

[*A shriek sounds from the temple, followed by a man's voice. All stand in rigid suspense. Cleito clutches Althea's arm.*]

I charge thee speak. That cry
Rang from the temple. Thou art silent. . . . Ah,
There steals on me a terror of the unknown.
Some dreadful deed is toward. Have mercy, woman!
Give me some little word to ease my soul. . .
I cannot bear this torture of suspense. . . .

[*A pause; then in a whisper*]

Where is Hephæstion?

[*The temple door is flung open and the Chorus files, chanting, on to the stage.*]

THE CHORUS.

All men for good or ill,
The lowly as the great,
Are vassal to the will
Of unrelenting Fate.

THE VIRGIN GODDESS

When first we see the light
And draw the living air,
While still we lie in night,
Unborn and unaware,
Fate has prepared the way down which our feet
must fare.

*[The Chorus forms, still chanting, a semicircle
about the statue, while slowly from the temple
two Youths bear the body of Cresphontes.
They lay it at the foot of the altar and cover
it with a white cloth.]*

THE CHORUS.

We have no power to stray
One step to left or right
From that predestined way
Which leads into the night ;
And even the gods that bide
In ecstasy unknown,
And hurl the bolt and guide
Through Heaven the planets lone,
Must bend them to that will far stronger than
their own.

*[Hephæstion, sword in hand, appears at the temple
door, while the Chorus continues chanting.
He moves slowly to the altar and lays his
sword upon it.]*

THE CHORUS.

But men of shallow soul
And prone to reckless dream

Strive blindly to control
Or move that will supreme.
Some seek to elude the dart,
Some crouch beneath the thong ;
But wisdom steels her heart
And makes her spirit strong
To take the worst of blows and bear the bitterest
wrong.

Hephæstion. Bring the herald hither.

Cleito. [*In a whisper*] *Hephæstion.* . . .

Hephæstion. Lead my mother away.

Althea. [*As though awaking out of a trance*] O Cleito !

[*She takes Cleito's hand.*]

Cleito. Let go my hand. I will remain. *Hephæstion*—

Hephæstion. I pray thee, woman, for thine own sake, go.

Cleito. Wherefore? [*A pause.*]

And who art thou to bid me hence ?

I obey the King—him only. Where is he ?

Hephæstion. [*After a dreadful pause*] *Cresphontes* cannot
see, nor speak with thee.

Althea. Oh, come away . . . beseech thee, come. . . .

[*She attempts to lead Cleito away, but the latter
wrenching herself free, speaks with intense
and tragic passion.*]

Cleito.

Now hear,

All ye that stand about me. The high gods,
Shedding upon mine eyes the darkness, shed
Light on my soul. Ere yet *Hephæstion* came,
I felt his coming and waxed chill with dread,

THE VIRGIN GODDESS

Knowing he brought with him unhappy dooms
 And tragic issues. . . . He is here, and now
 Ye cower about some dreadful deed of his,
 Seeking with silence from my piercing soul
 To guard it—but in vain!

[*Her voice rises to a shriek*] Ye fools! stand back!
 The thick night on mine eyeballs glimmers red!
 I see a horror of red on marble spilt!
 And white robes flecked with red!

[*She falters towards the steps.*]
 The air is dense

With reek of blood!—

[*They watch her for a moment in frozen silence
 as she staggers on. Then Hephæstion
 draws back as though to hide the body.*]

Hephæstion. [*Hoarsely*] What wilt thou?

Althea. [*With a sudden scream*] Stop! No step
 Further! [*She draws Cleito forcibly back.*]

Hephæstion, make an end—an end! . . .

I shall go mad!

[*Iphicles enters, followed by various Warriors
 and the Herald.*]

The Herald. Hephæstion, what is this?

I have the King's word, final and supreme.

What need of further parley?

Hephæstion. Thou hast heard
 Cresphontes, but the word of Artis—no!
 I speak for Artis: in my heart the heart
 Of all the city beats, and from my lips
 Sounds the united will of all her men.

[*He appeals to those assembled.*]

Do I speak well?

[*He is answered with shouts of assurance.*]

Althea, is it well?

Althea. The will of Artis is my will.

Hephæstion. Thou hast heard?

Then unto those without the city take

Our final and immutable reply.

We scorn their proffered peace. With all the might

That still is ours, and all our heart and soul,

We will oppose them in the chance of war ;

And without mercy given or mercy craved,

And even to the last breath of the last man here,

We'll fight them to the bitterness of death.

[*A great shout from the assembled warriors.*]

The Herald. Oh, yet, bethink thee : three to one are we,

For all thy mightiest men are far away.

Haply they lie in distant battle slain,

Or under the green waves . . .

Hephæstion. Enough ! Not Zeus

May change our fixed, imperious resolve.

Return to those that sent thee. Bid them arm

In haste : for I am as one that holds with sweat

In tightened leash the straining dogs of war.

[*Renewed shouts.*]

The Herald. I call upon the King—

Hephæstion. He cannot hear thee.

The Herald. Take him these words—

Hephæstion. No words of thine can reach him.

The Herald. The King—

Hephæstion. [*Pointing to the body*] Behold the King . . .

The Herald. [*With gesture of awe*] The King !

Cleito. [*In a voice of appeal*] Cresphontes

[*A moment of dead silence. All eyes are turned on Cleito. The Herald looks from her to Hephæstion and the Queen.*]

The Herald. To those that sent me will I take thy words.

[*Exit, accompanied by several warriors.*]

Cleito. Cresphontes [*A pause. Her voice breaks.*]

Oh, my son, make answer ! I,

Thy mother, I alone am leal to thee.

Oh, speak to me ! Say but a little word . . .

I want thy voice . . . Where is he ? [*A pause.*]

Althea. O Hephæstion,

Speak, for I cannot !

Hephæstion. Mother, he is here ;

But thou shalt never hear his voice again.

Cleito. But thou shalt never hear his voice again. . .

[*A pause ; then with deadly calm.*]

Where lies his body ?

Hephæstion. By the altar.

[*Cleito starts groping up the steps. Althea essays to assist her. She waives her away.*]

Cleito. Nay,

I want no hand of thine to assist me now.

Out of this night into the night to come

Henceforth I grope my dreadful way alone. . . .

[*She gropes her way to the corpse.*]

Althea. What have I done? I knew not what I did.

Cleito. [*Takes the cloth from the King's face and feels it*]

This is my son.

[*Dreamily, half to herself*] I have not seen his face

So many years. When last I saw his face

It was the face of youth, with soft, round cheeks. . .

But now it is the face of an old man—

The face of an old man. . . .

Hephæstion.

Hephæstion. Mother?

Cleito. How came my son to die?

Hephæstion. I slew him.

Cleito. What is't thou sayest? Ah, no, no, no, no, no!

It cannot be. [*Dazedly*] I heard a voice that spake

Saying, "I slew him," a voice that came from far—

A strange voice which I never heard before. . .

And yet, I knew not.

[*In passionate grief*] Let me not go mad!

I have endured the darkness many years,

And many blows of fate have I endured

Unmurmuring. Let me not go mad! Not that. . .

[*She rocks herself, moaning, to and fro.*]

No, no, I must be calm. . . . Who spake but now

Saying, "I slew him"?

Hephæstion. Cleito, it was I,

Thy son, who spake, Hephæstion, I who slew

Cresphontes, with the illustrious sword he shamed,

Our father's sword, and purged it with his blood.

Cleito. [*She has risen to her feet; her voice and demeanour are of solemn and tragic passion*] Now speak. Will none of you avenge your King? [*A pause.*]

A Warrior. His death was just. [*Approving murmurs.*]

Cleito. I ask you once again :
Will none avenge the King? [*A pause.*]

Not one. Hephæstion,

Where is thy father's sword?

Hephæstion. Upon the altar,

At thy right hand.

Cleito. Come hither.

[*Hephæstion goes up to her.*]

Take my hand

And guide it to the sword.

[*He does so, and she takes up the sword from the altar.*]

Now, art thou man,

Stand forth and bare thy breast and take from me
The swift and violent death thou gav'st the King.

He must not go to Hades unavenged,
And there is none to avenge him here but me,
His mother. Art thou ready?

Iphicles. [*To a Warrior*] Lo, he stands
As one entranced and rigid !

[*There is a low murmur and a movement among the Warriors. Althea suddenly springs forward and pulls Hephæstion aside.*]

Althea.

Nay, stand back,

Hephæstion. She is filled with fire divine,

Or madness out of Hell. [*To Cleito*] It was my will
That drave him to this splendid deed of blood.
Mine be the glory, mine the award. On him
The city leans. He must not die. Slay me!

Cleito. Thy fate was long since written on the stars :
Thou art reserved for some tremendous doom.
I could not slay thee if I would. Hephæstion,
Art thou prepared to die?

Hephæstion. [*Who has recovered his self-possession*] If so I
sinned,

I will accept thy vengeance with great heart.
But ere thou raise the sword that I have cleansed,
Hear me ; for tragic were indeed thy lot
If at thy hands I went unto the dead
Because I obeyed the high will of the gods.

Cleito. Speak on.

Hephæstion. And you that see my brother slain,
And these my hands all crimson with his life,
Judge also. Mother, when the tidings reached me
That over Artis, like twin thunderclouds,
Ruin, and worse than ruin, dishonour, gloomed,
I swore to compass her relief or die,
And keep her name untarnished evermore.
I came, and ere I met the King, discerned
No menace of dishonour, for all our men
Clamoured for instant battle and the embrace
Of furious death, and in my heart I said,
“Sunlike at least we’ll pass into the night,
Magnificent in dreadful pomp of blood!”

THE VIRGIN GODDESS

But he that now lies silent at thy feet,
Mother, e'en he that drew upon our walls
Peril, and made our name a scorn in Greece,
He would have quenched with set, intolerant will,
This fiery lust for splendid death, and fain
Had dashed the cup of glory from our lips,
Betraying the city to immortal shame,
And with immortal shame smirching the sword
That dazzled once the eyes of all the world.
Therefore I slew him. *[His voice drops.]*

Mother, if any power
Could have withheld my hand, that power was love—
The love I bear for thee, who loved me once,
And ushered me with pangs into the sun.
But for my land a larger love is mine,
And stronger duty to my land I owe—
Therefore I slew him. Though the steel that pierced
His recreant heart pierce also thine, beloved,
I slew him, and again would slay. Now raise
The sword. My breast is bare. If so I sinned,
Strike. I will go with proud, unruffled soul
Out of the beauty and the glow of life.

[A pause; then Cleito lets the sword drop to the ground.]

Cleito. I know not if thy deed was foul or fair. . .
Thy words are fair—but lo ! my son is dead—
My son is dead, and I am old and blind. . .

[She sinks on the ground and covers the dead face with kisses.]

O lips that once were full of broken words. . .
 O sweet eyes once so young and clear. Dead—dead—
 O child, my child! . . .

*[She breaks into bitter weeping, rocking herself
 to and fro.]*

Althea. *[Pitiifully touching her shoulder]* Cleito——

Cleito. *[Shrinking away]* Nay, touch me not.

Thy hands are also red with holy blood.

[She rises to her feet.]

Take up the body of my son, the King,
 And bear him to my chamber ; on my couch
 Lay him, and leave me with my dead alone.

[Two men take up the body.]

Hephæstion, if this deed with high intent
 Was wrought, thou art from punishment immune.
 But if thy hand was false that raised the sword,
 And thy heart wicked with unnatural hate,
 Then will the gods such vengeance hurl on thee
 As once they hurled on Clytemnestra's son,
 And men will shudder at thy name.

[To the men bearing the body] Lead on.

*[She takes the hand of the dead man and walks
 slowly out beside him. Hephæstion, Althea
 and the assembled men follow them silently
 with their eyes, while the Chorus chant the
 Death song.]*

SEMI-CHORUS OF WOMEN.

Out of the night

Where unborn spirits are

He came into the greenness and the sun ;

THE VIRGIN GODDESS

Into the night
That never knew a star
He goes as all the mighty ones have gone.

SEMI-CHORUS OF MEN.

O not for him
The roselight of the morn,
Or song of waves upon the lonely shore !
The fields he loved,
The hills where he was born,
Will never hear his footsteps any more.

CHORUS.

Shades among shades,
Down shadow valleys strange
He glides, and lingers by unearthly streams.
And life to him,
And hope and joy and change,
Are vague and far as dreams recalled in dreams.

Hephestion. I would, in truth, for his own soul's repose
That in the haunted and eternal dark
He may forget his life beneath the sun.
Enough. He is dead. And ye that now are free
To live as men, and fight as men, and die
As men should die, give judgment. Are my hands
Clean ? Is the shame that dulled my father's sword
Purged from the blade ?

[*Affirmative shouts from the Warriors.*]

A Warrior. Thrice holy is thy hand
That struck the blow, and from this bath of blood
Thrice glorious shines thy father's dreadful sword !

Another Warrior. And we are thine in life and death !

[*Renewed shouts.*]

Hephæstion.

Althea,

Why dost thou stand with white, averted face ?

Am I not clean and guiltless in thine eyes ?

[*A pause.*]

Why art thou silent ?

Althea.

Bid these men depart

And I will speak.

Hephæstion. [*To the Warriors*] Go now, and at your posts

Await my speedy coming, and prepare

For mighty ventures ere the dawn, for death

Or triumph.

Warriors.

We are thine in life and death !

[*Exeunt.*]

Hephæstion. [*To the Chorus*] And you into the temple,
and with prayer

And silver sounds implore the Holy One

For word of guidance now the hour is ripe

And chance must take our challenge and decide

The fate of Artis.

[*Soft music as the Chorus files into the temple.*

Hephæstion turns to the statue of Artemis.]

O divinely just,

O pitiful and true, forsake us not !

Much have we dared, and more will dare ; with thee

Beside us and thy counsel in our hearts,

We would assail the battlements of fate

Undaunted and defy the lightning.

Althea.

Oh,

Be still! How darest thou implore her aid
Whose eyes can pierce the night of human souls?

Hephæstion. [*In a strained voice*] But I have nought to
hide; I spread my soul

All unashamed before her virgin eyes.
Do I not know her who have served her long,
And in the hinting midnight read her will?
She will not hold him guilty who hath dared
To shed in such a cause his kindred blood.

Althea. What cause?*Hephæstion.* [*After a pause*] What cause?*Althea.* I ask thee once again—
What cause?*Hephæstion.* The cause of Artis.*Althea.*

O Hephæstion,

Thyself thou canst deceive with sounding words,
Others thou canst deceive, but never her.
Others may well forgive thee, but not she
Who is more pure than dewfall in the moon
And holy than the stars.

Hephæstion. Thy speech is strange.
What dark and mystic sin——*Althea.*

The sin which lit

That dreadful torch that flames across the years,
Troy. O Hephæstion, I am shamed to speak—
But speak I must. Look not upon me! Ah!
Would that my face had never seen the light!
Would that thine eyes had darkened ere they fell

Upon this face that leads thee to thy doom!
 Not love of Artis kindled in thy heart
 Hatred of him that was the King—not love
 Of Artis drove that sword into his breast—
 Not love of Artis—but the love of me.

Hephæstion. [Stands for a moment staring straight before him, then approaches her and says softly]

Althea . . .

[She stands silent with averted face. He speaks with hoarse intensity]

And was it love of Artis spake
 Through thy lips urging me to slay thy husband?
 Speak—was it love of Artis? *[Silence.]*

Althea.

No.

Hephæstion.

What then?

Althea. My love for thee.

Hephæstion. [With sudden passion] Ah, breathe those words again,

Beloved! *[He seizes her in his arms.]*

Althea. [Wrenching herself free] Touch me not! Thy touch is death!

Between our souls a crimson torrent seethes
 That nathless neither you nor I may ford,
 And over our heads avenging Fate rolls up
 Black thundercloud! Hephæstion, we are doomed
 For thou, whose life is dedicate to her
 Who is most jealous of the jealous gods,
 Hast broken from her cold, immortal arms
 To me.

Hephæstion. Althea——

Althea.

And thou hast used her city,

The chosen of her love, as cloak to hide
Thy blasphemous desire, and thou hast slain
Thy brother at her white, unsullied shrine,
Because he stood between thy love and me.

Hephæstion. All this is true. What then? I care not, so
I have thy lips. [*Takes her in his arms.*]

Althea. [*Once more repulsing him*] What! art thou mad?
Away! [*Kneels before the statue.*]

O, thou who art most just of all the gods,
O Artemis, not his the guilt but mine!
If thou must be avenged, strike me, not him.
For it was I who lured him from thine arms
And breathed upon the fire of human love
That smouldered in his heart, and it was I
Whose furious love and hatred urged him on
To drench thy feet with awful blood. Lo, then,
I kneel before thee with uncovered breast.
Loosen the string and let thine arrow find
Here in my heart its just and proper home.

Hephæstion. What if indeed she loose that arrow now?
Ah! not before such beauty is mine own.

[*Draws her forcibly up to him.*]

Althea!

Althea. [*Struggling feebly*] Let me go!

Hephæstion.

Never again

Save at the cold unanswerable command
Of Death. I have foregone immortal love
To hold thy mortal loveliness embraced,

And would forego all things that earth can give
And heaven promise.

Althea. I am so afraid . . .

We are compassed round with terrors of the
night . . .

Up to this spot where now we stand embraced
Winds a long trail of blood guiding them on,
Those furies out of Hell.

Hephæstion. [*Crushing her to him*] Look in my face.

Dost thou not feel my love in all thy being,
And my defending arms about thy form?
And art thou still afraid?

Althea. Ah, love, my love,
Hold me against thee—hold me hard. . . . Ah,
kiss me

Full on my lips . . . [*He kisses her.*]

And hast thou loved me long?

Hephæstion. When first we met beside the singing wave,
In the white moon, unconsciously I loved thee,
O human face that I could never reach!

Althea. I loved thee then, and knew my love. He stood,
Who now is dead, between thy lips and mine.
O well I read thy heart and felt thy love
Unspoken in the ardour of thine eyes.

Hephæstion. And love and hatred filled me with unrest
And drove me forth into the beckoning world,
Over the blue hills and across the sea.
And ever on my wanderings fared with me
A face whose beauty seemed not of the earth

I saw it in the splendour of the noon,
I saw it in the purple dusk of dreams,
And in the sunset ritual of gold,
And in the silver spirit of the dawn,
And on the white and lonely mountain tops,
And moving like a vapour on the sea
I saw that face . . .

Althea. [*Whispers*] The face of Artemis?

Hephæstion. In truth it seemed her face—so white and
chaste,

So passing holy and divinely sweet ;
And thrilled with adoration unto her
I gave myself, my body and my soul,
To serve her even to the hour of death.
And evermore that face abode with me,
By night and day—and now in lovelier lines
I see it and more perfect beauty.

Althea. [*Trembling*] Now—
The face of Artemis?

Hephæstion. Thy face, beloved. . . .

Ah, it was no immortal face I saw,
Nor is it an immortal face I see,
But thine, O sweet and human lips and eyes,
My Queen !

Althea. Then—then 'twas I that haunted thee—
Me — me whom thou did'st worship all those
years ?

Hephæstion. Yea, thy remembered yet forgotten face.
And when I saw thee once again, meseemed

The goddess stood before me in fair flesh.
I trembled, and the past returned.

Althea.

Ah, take

And hold me in thine arms for evermore.

Hephæstion. I'll hold thee in my arms against the world.

Fated for one another from of old,
Parted by fate, and drawn by fate together,
We stand, and neither man, nor god, nor fate
Shall part us. For the love I bear for thee
Hath put a rushing fire into my veins,
And thewed me with unconquerable steel :
I was a man, but now I am a god,
And I defy the powers !——

*[The temple door is thrown open and a Priest
stands on the threshold.]*

The Priest.

O Queen Althea,

And thou, Hephæstion, our exceeding peril
Hath moved the great heart of the Holy One,
And to our cry she hath inclined her ear.
For even now one of those virgins three
That knelt in prayer before the inmost shrine
Rose to her feet with mystic rapture thrilled,
And muttering unintelligible words,
Shuddered into an alabaster calm,
Her wide ecstatic eyes on the unseen
Fixed, and her white breast heaving, and her hair
Blown all about her by unearthly winds.
So stands she waiting on the word divine.
Lo, then, I charge thee call upon her name

Who can alone defeat the imminent doom,
For now at length that dreadful hour is here
Which must decide the fate of all we love. [Exit.]

[The Chorus, singing softly, files on to the stage and groups itself in a semicircle about the statue.]

Althea. I tremble, for an end draws nigh.

Hephæstion. What end ?

Althea. Our heaven cancelled by the tides of night.

Hephæstion. The starless night were beautiful with thee !

We can but die—and what is death ?

Althea. I know not.

CHORUS.

O twin-born with the sun, and fair as she
Who rose all flushed from the reluctant sea,
O pure with dew and moonlight purity—
Artemis, hear our prayer !

Hephæstion. Goddess, thy faithful city, thy beloved,
The nursling reared upon thy virgin breast,
Stands now at bay, her back against the night,
Her reckless front opposed to many spears.
She knows not fear ; but pauses and awaits
Ere yet she storm the bastioned heights of doom,
Thy word of counsel or thy promised aid.

CHORUS.

O brilliant huntress in the glades of night,
And fleeter-footed than the flying light,
And sure of hand and terrible to smite—
Artemis, hear our prayer !

Althea. O thou whom passion never led astray,
Coldly impartial and serenely just,
If any here have erred against thy will,
On them let fall the arrows of thy wrath,
But to the innocent extend thy hand.

CHORUS.

To thee the stricken and the helpless creep,
Thou giv'st to those whom life hath wounded deep
A death more delicate than dreamless sleep—
Artemis, hear our prayer!

*[The door of the temple opens, and on the threshold
stands one of the three Virgins. Her aspect
is wild and menacing. She glides forward.]*

Virgin. Enough! The Holy One hath heard our prayer.

Althea. Hephæstion, shield me from that woman's eyes,
Fiery with accusing menace!

Virgin. *[Staring ominously at Althea]* She

Hath spoken her unalterable decree

Into mine ears, and she must be obeyed.

Althea. *[Staggering back in terror]* Avert thine eyes!

Hephæstion. Speak and have done.

Althea—

Althea. *[In a frenzy of fear]* I cannot bear the horror of
that gaze—

I see a sword hovering above my breast—

I feel the solid earth slipping away

From under my feet! The dark—

[She falls in a swoon to the ground.]

Hephæstion. [*Bending over Althea*] She hath swooned away.
Althea . . . she is white and still as death.

[*Fiercely to the Virgin*] But me thou canst not wither
with thine eyes,

Nor with thy tongue. Speak out!

Virgin.

I prayed within,

When suddenly upon my soul there swept
Unearthly music from the hills of dream
And alien darkness from beyond the world.
Then a white star rose singing in the gloom,
Grew large, and like a vast and luminous rose,
Unfolding delicate petals one by one,
Disclosed a heart intolerably bright,
And from that brightness, like an odour, breathed
The voice of Artemis, and spake :

“Hephæstion,

Whose life was dedicate to none save me,
Lured by the fair flesh of his brother's wife,
Hath scorned his vow and slain his brother, and sought
To veil his wickedness in patriot love.
Therefore shall Artis sink into the dust,
And all her people to the dead go down,
Unless Hephæstion take his father's sword
And slay Althea as sacrifice to me
Ere the sun disappear into the wave.
Nor shall he leave this precinct where he stands
And join the battle ere this deed be done.
I have spoken.”

And the luminous blossom closed

Its petals, dwindled to a star, and sank,
And the great darkness lifted from my soul.

[*Silence. Hephæstion stands motionless, staring straight in front of him. Shouting without. Iphicles and several Warriors rush in.*]

Iphicles. Hephæstion, tarry not! Beyond our walls
The broad plain glitters with advancing steel :
The foe have risen, and like a wave they roll
Against us.

[*He perceives Hephæstion's tragic silence and immobility. His voice drops uneasily.*]

Take thy father's sword—

[*Hephæstion stands as before. A Warrior touches Iphicles' arm.*]

Warrior. [In a whisper, pointing to Althea] The Queen—
Iphicles. Is the Queen dead?

[*A Warrior hands Iphicles the sword, which he puts into Hephæstion's hand.*]

Come, take thy father's sword—

[*Hephæstion stands immovable and the sword drops out of his hand. They all stare at him in awe-struck amazement.**]

Iphicles. What ails thee, lord?

Hephæstion. [Rousing himself] What ails me? Nothing—
I—

What mean'st thou?

Iphicles. Has the goddess spoken her will?

* It was here that the curtain descended for the second time.

Hephæstion. [*Pointing to the Virgin*] Nay, but that woman
from her ruined mind

Hath raved delirious fury.

Iphicles. [*Pointing to Althea*] And the Queen?

Hephæstion. [*Falls on his knees beside Althea*] Althea! . . .

I thank the gods she swooned away

Before that madness smote upon her ears. . . .

White as the dead and very cold . . . Althea. . . .

[*He holds her in his arms and gazes into her face.*

*Then he raises her up and says to one of the
Warriors*]

Bear her within and bid the women tend her,
And at her door keep watch.

[*A Warrior takes Althea in his arms.*]

She must not hear

The slenderest rumour of these frenzied words—

No, not a breath.

[*Clasps Althea's hand and gazes into her face.*]

Still cold, still cold, my Queen.

Go. . . . [*Exit the Warrior, bearing Althea.*]

Iphicles. And those words, Hephæstion, what were they?

Hephæstion. What meanest thou?

Iphicles. The words yon Virgin spake.

Hephæstion. [*Fiercely*] I'll sully not my lips repeating
them.

[*Picks up his sword*] Come, for the foe await us.

Virgin. Iphicles,

Our goddess hath decreed that Artis reel

With all her people back into the dust,
Unless——

Hephæstion. I charge thee hold thy peace and go.
I'll not endure thy speech again.

Virgin. Hephæstion,
Beware lest blacker hurricane of wrath
Descend upon thee. That which I have heard
That must I speak for all the world to hear.
Because this man desired his brother's wife
He killed his brother and brake his deathless vows :
Therefore shall ruin rush upon the city
Unless he slay the woman whom he loves
Ere the sun disappear into the sea. [*Consternation.*]

A Warrior. [*In a whisper*] The Queen?

Virgin. The Queen.

Iphicles. [*Dully*] Unless he slay the Queen?

Hephæstion. Was I not right? Long prayer hath wrecked
her soul.

Leave her to rave and follow me. [*He moves off.*]

Virgin. Hephæstion,
It was decreed thou should'st not go to battle
Before that awful sacrifice was made.

Hephæstion. [*Defiantly*] Ah ! who hath force to hold my
war-ward feet?

Come !

[*He takes a few steps, then suddenly stops, as though arrested, and staggers back, his face transfixed with terror. He puts his hand over his eyes and stands for a moment breathing hard.*]

A Warrior. [*In a whisper*] Is he smitten?

Iphicles Lord . . . what ails thee? Lord?

[*Hephæstion stands rigid. The Warriors whisper together.*]

Hush!

Hephæstion. [*In a faint, tremulous voice*] *Iphicles.* . . .

Iphicles. I am here.

Hephæstion. [*Slowly reaching out his hand*] Give me thy hand.

I stand as in a night without a star . . .

I am afeared. . . . [*Clutches Iphicles' hand*]

Thy hand. . . . Ah! hold me fast!

I am all benumbed. . . . *Iphicles,* something, something

Laid on my heart a viewless clutch of ice.

I could not move—I dared not move—

[*He stands for a moment staring straight in front of him, then suddenly flings Iphicles aside.*]

Away!

I'll not be stayed by all the gods in Heaven!

I'll strangle opposition with these hands!

I'll—

[*He moves determinedly away, and is once again invisibly arrested, and staggers backwards, dropping his sword on to the ground. He stands for a moment rigid, while the Warriors whisper excitedly together.*]

[*Shouting without. Two Warriors enter hurriedly.*]

A Warrior. Where is he? *Hephæstion,* come!

Another Warrior.

The foe

Have gained that breach they made against the south !
They crushed us backward with resistless spears.
Give us thine arm and tarry not !

*[A pause. He glances around him bewildered
and realises Hephæstion's strained posture.
His voice changes.]*

Hephæstion . . .

*Hephæstion. [After a pause, in a dull, weak voice to
himself]* The blood thaws in my veins. I hear
my heart

Beating and feel my strength return. The dream
Hath passed away. For dream it was—a dream—
That horror of blind force that held my soul
Captive, and utterly destroyed my will,
Unmanned me quite, and robbed me of my power—
A dream—no more—and now—

[He seems to pull himself together]

Now must I take my sword—my father's sword—
The sword I cleansed, and go into the fight.

[Iphicles picks up the sword.]

They called me : they are pressed. I must get hence,
And lead them on. I swore to lead them on
To victory or death . . . my sword . . .

Iphicles. [Handing it to him] 'Tis here.

*[Hephæstion takes the sword and stands motion-
less, staring wildly before him.]*

A Warrior. [In a whisper] What is it ?

Another Warrior.

He is accursed.

Iphicles. [Touching Hephæstion's arm] Hephæstion, speak.

Hephæstion. [*In a dead voice*] Something hath sapped my
courage at the source.

My limbs are manacled. I dare not move
Against that viewless barrier again.

I am undone. . . . Leave me alone. . . .

[*He waves them all aside, and half turning
towards the temple, perceives the Virgin.
He stiffens with sudden fury.*]

Ah, thou,

White sorceress, take thine eyes from off my face,
And from my spirit lift these spells of thine!

[*He advances menacingly towards the steps.*]

I charge thee break these gyves invisible
That bind me hand and foot. By all the gods,
I will assail thy magic at the heart
And send thy soul into the hideous night
From whence it rose, and free mine own!

[*He makes a sudden rush towards her, but
Iphicles and Warriors intervene.*]

Stand back!

[*He assails them furiously.*]

Iphicles. [*Struggling with him*] Hephæstion, art thou mad?

Hephæstion. [*In a frenzy*] Stand back, I say!

See how she smiles on me with hate of hell.

I will obliterate that face! Let go!

Unhand me, or, by Zeus! I'll cut my way

Through flesh and bone to reach her where she stands

Weaving my ruin! [*He struggles madly.*]

A Warrior. She is holy and pure.

Iphicles. Lord, I implore thee!

Virgin. [*Hearing her voice, Hephæstion ceases to struggle.*]

Harken to my words,

Nor waste thyself in fury on my head.

I am but the passive instrument wherethrough

Artemis breathes her will, and in thy heart,

Hephæstion, well thou knowest I am true

And speak what I have heard. I hate thee not :

Rather I pity thee as the sport of fate

And Queen Althea, whose beauty lured thee on.

But when the gods speak they must be obeyed.

Resistance is in vain : be thou resigned,

And take the awful punishment decreed.

[*The Virgin turns and glides slowly back into the temple. A long pause.*]

Hephæstion. [*Unsteadily*] Why stand you here? The battle calls you. Go!

Iphicles. And thou, Hephæstion?

Hephæstion. [*Fiercely*] What of me? Away!

A Warrior. In vain, for now we battle without hope.

Hephæstion. [*In sudden fury*] Thou liest!

[*Springs upon the man and clutches his throat.*]

A Warrior. Let go . . .

Hephæstion. Unsay those words!

Iphicles. [*Restraining Hephæstion*] My lord!

Hephæstion. [*Hurling the man off*] What meant that fellow with his craven lie? [*He glares around him*]

Dream not all strength has withered from mine arm.

Let him that holds the words yon woman spoke

For truth inspired by Artemis stand forth—

I'll prove him liar with my naked hands,
And tear his body and soul asunder.

Iphicles. [*After a silence*] Lord,
I know the holy Virgin's words were true.

Hephæstion. Iphicles, thou!

Iphicles. Alas, my lord, alas!

Why should we blind our eyes against the truth,
Or fly the thing we never can escape?

I know with heavy heart, and thou—nay, hear me—

Thou knowest as surely that our doom is sealed:

That Artis and her people are condemned

Unless thou slay the Queen.

Hephæstion. What then?

Iphicles. I know not:

I am thy servant and obey thy will.

Hephæstion. 'Tis well. Then take my will and get thee
gone.

Even were that woman's frenzy high inspired

By the unsparing purpose of the gods

And urged by all the tyranny of fate,

I would oppose it to the latest breath,

And final ebb of power to grasp my sword.

And had each man of Artis myriad lives,

And every life were an agony to lose,

And all were lost unless I slew the Queen—

Then should the Queen live and those others die,

Woman and man and child. Are ye content?

[*A silence.*]

Then get ye gone. [*Iphicles and Warriors move off.*]

Iphicles. [Turning with an imploring gesture] Hephæstion,
hear me——

Hephæstion. Go!

[*Exeunt all save Hephæstion and Chorus.*]

CHORUS.

[*While Hephæstion stands motionless, staring
straight before him.*]

Not in slow decay
And retreating light
Let me go my way
Back into the night,
But in flare and fury of unyielding fight.
Let not weeping eyes,
Be the last I see,
Sorrow-laden sighs
Close the ears of me :
These for slaves and women : I am man and free.
Lo, in glittering pride
And with eyes aglow,
As unto a bride
Singing as they go
Down upon us wavelike roll the splendid foe.
And the blaze and sound
Turn my soul to fire,
And my pulses bound
With supreme desire,
Valour Heracleian, strength that cannot tire.

Force has met with force,
Steel encountered steel :
Hero, man and horse
Crash and sway and reel . . .
Never singer chanted half the joy I feel.
This is life : to keep
Steadfast to the light.
This is death : to leap
From the topmost height
Of ecstatic being straight into the night.

Hephæstion. [*Passionately*] Enough! Why torture me
with songs of battle,
Who am denied the privilege of death?
One of the Chorus. There is naught left to pray for but
that death

Come as the lightning comes and linger not.

Hephæstion. Leave me alone.

One of the Chorus. [*As the others file into the temple*] Look
westward, lord : the sun
Sheds a long path of gold across the sea.

[*The sunlight deepens in colour until the close of
the Act.*]

[*Exit the Chorus into the temple.*]

[*A pause. Then Hephæstion gazing westward,
cries out with tragic passion*]

Hephæstion. O stay thy coursers but a little while!
For bound, O Helios, to thy golden car
Roll to the water more tremendous dooms
Than ever threatened man since Troy went down
Palled in funereal smoke.

[*He turns*] I am alone . . .

Have I the fortitude to face the truth
And look avenging Fate between the eyes?
I am alone.

[*A note of fear creeps into his voice*] Am I alone?

[*In sudden terror*] There stands

One in the sunlight whom I cannot see.
She binds my feet, she robs me of my power,
She reads with smiling cruelty my heart
Writ large with helpless passion and despair.
She moves upon me like a wind of night
Blowing from hills of ice . . . I feel her breath
Upon my face . . . Artemis . . . Artemis. . . .

[*He gradually pulls himself together*] No!

Why should I fear who never feared before?
I will stand up and take my doom with pride,
And go with all my people to the dead,
Conquered and yet unbroken to the end.
Yea, Artemis, and mercy from thy hands
Would I reject because it came from thee,
Who art most callous of the callous gods,
And cruellest, being cold as moonlight.

[*Cleito slowly descends the palace steps led by a girl.*]

Ah,

Mother, thou com'st in favourable hour
To flaunt thy triumph and to mock thy son.

Cleito. I triumph not, nor mock thee in thy fall.
Justice I asked and justice I received.

The gods have paid thee justly for thy crime.
Where is Althea?

Hephæstion. She hath swooned away
And lies within her chamber.

Cleito. Then she heard
Thy sentence?

Hephæstion. Nay, she swooned ere it was spoken.

Cleito. [*In a voice of intense hatred*] Let her not die
unconscious of her doom :

She must return to life before the end,
And realise the sweetness of the sun,
And all the horror which her face hath wrought,
And all the loathing of the immortal gods,
And all the hatred that she leaves behind.

Hephæstion. Be still! I'll not endure thy inhuman tongue!
Old woman, let thy bloody fancies brood
On Artis fallen and her people dead,
Not on Althea sacrificed by me.
I would not slay her for a thousand cities,
Nor at the mandate of a thousand gods.

Cleito. Would not! Thou fool! Dost pit thy human will
'Gainst the unconquerable will of Fate?
Kill her thou must, for so it was ordained
Before thine eyelids opened on the sun.

Hephæstion. What meanest thou?

Cleito. Long since in dream I saw
Althea dead, and she was slain by thee.

Hephæstion. I care not for thy dreams.

Cleito. [*Touching his arm and in a changed voice*]

Hephæstion,
I have borne two sons, and one of them is not,
And one still lives, and though his hands are red
With a deed fiercer than Orestes wrought,
And though on him the fury of the gods
Sweeps like a storm, his destiny is still
Magnificent with glory far away.
Up then, and linger not! Thy path is clear,
The atoning sacrifice awaits thy hand,
With victory for us and peace for thee.

[*A pause. Hephæstion stands motionless.*]

Where stands the sun?

Attendant. It reddens toward the sea.

Cleito. Then must this deed be done and on the instant.

Hephæstion, answer me. . . . Hephæstion!

[*A pause. He stands motionless.*]

Hephæstion, art thou turned to stone?

Hephæstion. Alas!

Would I were stone, and not this flesh and blood
That burns and shudders in the cruel gin
Which those high powers whose sport is human pain
Cunningly baited for mine overthrow . . .
To quench the love-light in thine eyes, my Queen,
And the love-murmur on thy lips—no—no!—
It cannot be—it shall not be!

[*Flinging off Cleito's hand.*]

Away!

Thy murderous tongue would lure me from the path

Which I resolve unfalteringly to tread.
 If naught but this foul sacrifice can save
 Artis from ruin, then let Artis go
 The way of Troy, and—[*Distant shouting from without.*]
 Ah!

Cleito.

Be still and hark!

[*The shouting grows louder.*]

Those sounds approach. I hear the wail of women,
 The cry of children . . .
 [*Her voice sharp with fear*] Ah, the streets run blood!
 The towers are wrapt in unremorseful fire!
 Is it too late? Hephæstion, tell me quick—
 Is the sun's foot upon the sea?

Hephæstion.

Not yet.

Cleito. Then fetch the Queen. I charge thee fetch the
 Queen!

Where is thy father's sword? Why lingerest thou?
 Hast thou no ears? [*The cries grow louder.*]

Ah, ah, those cries again . . .

The mortal agony of helpless souls . . .
 Save them!

[*She falls on her knees, clutching hold of
 Hephæstion.*]

Hephæstion, crimson are thy hands
 With blood of one: wilt thou drown thyself in
 blood
 Of thousands?

Hephæstion. [*Pushing her away*] Were it millions, they must die.

I will not slay the Queen.

[*He moves away from her to the palace steps.*]

[*With tumult and cries a crowd composed of women, old men and children, held with difficulty in check by several Warriors, press on to the stage.*]

A Warrior. [*Pushing back some women*] Stand back!

A Woman. [*Screaming to those behind*] He is here!

[*Tumult and cries of "Hephæstion!"*]

Another Woman. Where is the Queen?

[*Cries of "The Queen!"*]

The sun is low in the west.

A Warrior. Silence! Ye do but hurt your urgent cause
With such unbridled passion.

An Old Man. Let me speak!

An Old Woman. Hephæstion, lo, my daughter is with
child

And slowly starves . . .

A Woman. My little son is dead—

Slain by the pestilence—

Another Woman. Where is Althea?

Another Woman. We perish by degrees.

Another Woman. The end is near.

Another Woman. We trust in thee; we pray to thee;
Hephæstion,

On thee, and thee alone, depend our lives—

Save us! [*They fall on their knees, wailing.*]

Others. O save us! Save us!

A Warrior. [*Commanding silence*] Let me speak.

Hephæstion, scant the time for eloquence,
And scant the need. This crouching people here
Is eloquence enough. We are no more,
Save for the intervention of thy hand.
Through that wide breach they made against the south
The rebel spears have driven a furious path.
With sweat and agony we hold them back
In the open street. Thou only canst avert
The crash of doom as Artemis decreed.

[*A pause.*]

A Woman. O save us!

Another Woman. O have mercy on thy people!

Hephæstion. I can do nothing.

A Warrior. Is Althea alive?

Hephæstion. [*Harshly*] Let not the Queen's name pass thy
lips again.

It seems the craven spirit that I quenched
Hath passed to you. Cresphontes is no more ;
But ye would purchase liberty and life
With woman's blood in dreadful anguish spilt.
Has courage wholly withered from your heart
And the heroic manhood of old time?
Shame on you !

Cleito. Nay, Hephæstion, shame on thee !

People of Artis, look upon this man.
His lust it is delivers you to death—
His and the woman's whom they call the Queen.

He, and he only, can avert your doom,
And yet he will not. Woman, man, and child,
The innocent, the noble, and the weak,
Perish to save a guilty wanton's life.
This is your hero, this, alas, my son!

[Murmurs that swell into execrations.]

A Woman. *[Screaming above the din]* But can no force of
ours compel his hand?

Say, are you men, and will you stand aside
And indolently watch this fellow fling
Our wives and children to the sword?

[The uproar increases.]

Cleito.

Men? Men?

These are no men. The only men we had
Sailed forth long since to war and now are dead.

*[Furious execrations from the Women. The
Warriors stand undecided.]*

A Warrior. Silence! Hephæstion, we must have the
Queen,

And she must die as Artemis decreed.
We can no longer hold the rebels back.
It is one guilty life for many lives.
Give us the Queen.

Women and Warriors. The Queen! The Queen!

[They surge towards the palace steps.]

Hephæstion. *[Drawing his sword]* Stand back!

No mortal power hath force to make me yield.
Ye shall not have the Queen! . . .

[They press forward with cries of fury.]

Stand back, I say !

That man is dead who dares to advance a step
Further.

A Warrior. Enough ! Seize him, but slay him not
Or we are lost. The Queen !

*[They make a rush upon him and drag him to
the temple steps, when he hurls them off.]*

Hephæstion. *[Pointing his sword to his throat]* Now hear
me. If another man step forth
To assail me where I stand, this sword shall draw
My life's blood and annihilate your hopes.
A dead man cannot sacrifice the Queen.

*[Althea appears on the palace steps. She stands
for a moment staring wildly at Hephæstion.]*

Althea. *[With a scream]* Hephæstion !

Hephæstion. *[With a start, turning]* Ah !

Warriors and Women. *[In whispers]* The Queen !

Althea. Put up thy sword.

*[Hephæstion sheathes his sword. Althea descends
to him and touches his hand fearfully.]*

Thy hands are flesh and blood. I am awake,
Not erring, as I hoped, in evil dreams.

[To the people assembled.]

But who are ye ? I know you not. . .

Hephæstion,
What meant that dreadful vision of thyself
Standing upon the sudden edge of death ?

[Hephæstion is silent.]

Ah, am I mad? . . . Whence come these lowering faces?

Are you not men and women of our city?

What awful thing hath happened since I passed

Swooning into the darkness?

Cleito. Hear my words——

Hephæstion. I charge thee hold thy peace.

[*To Althea.*] Beloved, go—

I pray thee go.

Cleito. And I command thee stay

And take thy doom.

Hephæstion. Be still!

[*The crowd murmurs.*]

Althea. [*Touching Cleito's arm*] Cleito, speak on.

Cleito. [*Shaking her off*] Because thou hast urged my son to break his vow

And slay the King, his brother, for thy sake,

Artemis in her loathing of thy lust

And of thy blasphemy and murderous hate,

Hath doomed this city and all that dwell therein

To ruin and death unless Hephæstion slay thee

As sacrifice before the sun go down.

[*A long silence. The Queen turns slowly to Hephæstion.*]

Althea. Hephæstion . . .

Hephæstion. Queen.

Althea. The words thy mother spake—

Are they the truth? [*He is silent.*]

Answer me.

Hephæstion.

They are true.

[*A pause. Althea looks towards the sinking sun, then turns to Hephæstion.*]

Althea. Before the sun go down? The sun is low . . .

Hephæstion, we have little time for speech.

Where must I die?

Hephæstion.

Althea, art thou mad?

What are to me the words of Artemis,

And what to me the city and this people?—

Nothing!

[*Murmurs from the crowd.*]

I care for nothing in all the world,
Save only thee. Thou art the air I breathe,
My food and drink, my sun and moon and stars,
My one divinity and sole desire! . . .

[*The crowd break forth into execrations. He glares at them and suddenly catches her to him. She stands passively in his embrace.*]

We stand alone; but such a love as ours—
Stronger than hatred, stronger than the gods,
Stronger than fate——

Cleito.

And yet so pitiful,

It were a waste of scorn to brand thy love—

Love that inspired thy hand to assault and slay

A man unarmed, and glory in thy deed—

Love that so strangles all nobility

And pity in thee and manhood once thine own,

Thou would'st condemn the innocent and weak—

Althea. [*Freeing herself from Hephæstion*] Be still! As
Artemis hath singled me,
And justly, for the atoning sacrifice,
Mine be the final and deciding word.
Hephæstion, if thou hesitate to obey
The voice of Artemis, thy love is vile,
Vile as thy mother's fury brands it, vile
As love men waste upon a wanton. . . . Speak,
Wilt thou obey the voice of Artemis?

Hephæstion. [*In a whisper*] And slay thee?

Althea. Even so.

Hephæstion. Slay thee. . . I cannot.

I have not heard aright. . . .

Althea, listen.

The Virgin, fired by some delirious hate,

Lied, for I saw it in her face—she lied.

Thy death would nought avail to save the city.

Hear me——

A Woman. 'Tis he that lies.

[*The crowd surges forward with execrations.*]

Another Woman. Believe him not.

Cleito. Peace! For she cannot now escape her doom!

They are both tangled in the web of fate.

Living I saw her not; I have seen her dead. . .

She's dead already.

Althea. Bring the Virgin hither.

[*A Warrior starts to obey. Hephæstion stops him.*]

Hephæstion. [*In terror*] Nay, for I cannot bear her face
again,

Nor hear that voice denouncing judgment. . . Queen,
Grant me a little time—a little time . . .

Althea. I have no time to grant. The sun is low.

Hephæstion. [*Wildly*] Then I implore thy mercy, I am
broken,

Cornered and beaten to my knees . . . Althea,
Had I the strength to crush the god of war,
I could not slay thee even if I would . . .
This arm would wither ere it raised the sword.

[*Falling on his knees, his voice breaking with
passion and despair.*]

Hear me and pity me, and ye people, pity me
And show a little mercy. Slay me here—
Slay me. I long for death with all my soul.
But drive my sword into the heart I love—
I cannot.

[*He raises imploring hands to the statue.*]

Goddess, I have served thee long,
And worshipped thee among the lonely hills,
And honoured thee with sacrificial hands—
Wilt thou requite thy votary so ill,
Thrusting a deathless horror on his soul
And blasting him to all eternity?
I crave not thy forgiveness. All I crave
Is death, in any agony thou wilt.
But not this vengeance . . . pity me—

[*He covers his face with his hands.*]

Althea. [*Going to him and touching his shoulder*] *Hephæstion.*

[*He looks up.*]

Beloved, rise and take my hand in thine,
And hear my words. [*He rises to his feet.*]

Death that men greatly fear
Is often fairer than the life they love,
And such a death has fate reserved for me.
I die that all may live that call me Queen—
All whom I love and love me, and I take
This splendid death at his beloved hands
Whom most I love in all the world.

Hephæstion. [*Brokenly*] But ah,
To go out of the warmth into the cold . . .
Out of the holy sunlight to the dark . . .
Out of mine arms. . .

Althea. [*Dreamily*] Yes, in the place of souls
I shall not see the sunlight any more . . .

[*Pause. She speaks with passionate ardour.*]
To go out of thine arms! Oh this, beloved,
This is the final glory of my death :
That ere the years and memory and the world
Had cooled the burning beauty of our love,
We should go straight apart for evermore—
Now, now when all thy being thrills to me,
And all I am is passionately thine!

[*She clasps him round the neck.*]
Friend, had I lived the irrevocable past,
The dead past that can never wholly die,
Would have numbed our hearts with its funereal
breath
And filled our souls with memories best forgot.

We might have loved each other to the end,
But never again with such a love as now.
We might have grown to loathe what now we love.
But where I go is neither love nor hate,
And from the soul all memory dies away.

Hephæstion. Queen, I am broken, I am without strength ;
But thou art strong, and I must do thy will . . .

[*She draws his head to her and kisses his forehead.*]

Althea. [*Turning to the people*] And you, beloved people
of my city,

Take from my lips an ultimate farewell.
Unwillingly I leave the light behind,
Yet am I happy, knowing that my death
Will bring divine salvation to the land.
And this I pray you. In the days to be,
And though all memories wither from my soul
And in the darkness I forget the sun,
Forget not me, but think of me as one
Who greatly sinned because she greatly loved,
Who gladly bore the vengeance of her sin,
And went the strait and bitter way of death
Unflinching and as a Queen should go.
Farewell! [*The people bow their heads in silence.*]
Cleito, farewell!

Cleito.

Farewell!

Althea. [*As the Chorus files out of the temple*] Beloved,
Come, for the sun's rim rests upon the sea,
And the night calls my spirit from afar.

[*The Chorus form about the statue, and Althea and Hephæstion pass slowly into the temple.*]

CHORUS.

Disimpassioned Queen of Darkness, lo, to thee there
cometh one,

Fairer never trod the meadows or delighted in the sun,
And for her the joy of living and of love had just begun.

But the joy she puts behind her, and the love she waives
aside,

And with steadfast feet unfaltering, proudly and unterrified,
Goes where love can never enter, and no happiness abide.

Disimpassioned Queen of Darkness, turn on her benignant
eyes.

If she sinned, her sin is cancelled by this radiant sacrifice.
Let her deeply drink of Lethe and forget the morning
skies,

And forget her white-walled city, and forget her lordly
race,

Dragged from long-established glory down to imminent
disgrace,

And forget her lover's kisses, and forget her lover's face.

[*From far comes the distant sound of shouting.
It grows rapidly nearer and louder.*]

A Warrior. Hark!

A Woman. They are here !

[As the sound swells in volume the crowd become more and more fevered and terrified.]

Another Woman. It is the foe !

Another Woman. We are lost !

A Warrior. Althea dies in vain !

Another Warrior. Come, let us die,

Our faces 'gainst the foe unto the last !

[The shouting grows louder. The Women surge shrieking to the statue and fall in supplication before it. All the Warriors rush out to battle.]

A Woman. Goddess, have mercy on the innocent !

That which we could we've done to assuage thy wrath.

Another Woman. Have pity on us ! Save our lives at least !

Another Woman. Our children's lives.

An Old Man. We sacrificed the Queen.

[The noise grows deafening. The Women huddle shrieking together.]

They come ! O Artemis, let death be swift . . .

[A Warrior rushes in.]

The Warrior. Stand up and shout, for we are saved !

Women. Saved ! Saved !

[Hysterical weeping and cries of joy.]

An Old Man. What miracle hath happened ?

[Other Warriors rush in shouting.]

A Woman. We are saved !

An Old Man. Are the foe beaten from our walls ?

A Warrior.

They fly :

They have seen our galleys sweeping from the north,
Their sails full-bellied with miraculous winds.

Women. Our galleys?

Others.

Speak . . .

Others.

Our vanished army?

A Warrior.

Yea,

Praise ye the gods : our long-lost ships are here !

[*Iphicles enters.*]

Iphicles. [*Commanding silence*] People of Artis, from the
jaws of death

We have been magically snatched away.

For even as our ultimate defence

Bent to the breaking point before the might

Of overwhelming odds and furious hate,

We felt a sudden slackening in the assault,

And the victorious faces of our foes

Wavered and blanched. A panic-striking word

Swept like a wind across the rebel lines,

And from our seaward-facing walls a cry

Triumphant rang : " Our ships, our ships return ! "

And so it was. For round the northern cape,

Swept the proud fleet that we imagined lost ;

And the foe brake and fled, and even now

Our warriors set their feet upon the land.

Soon shall their fury drench the hills with blood,

And we shall be avenged, and we shall stand,

Artis shall stand where once she stood of old,

Our holy city feared of all the world
And favoured of the gods!

[With shouts of triumph and hysterical cries of joy the people surge about the temple steps. Suddenly the great doors of the temple fall apart and Hephæstion appears on the threshold. Perceiving him, the people fall gradually silent. He moves slowly down the steps to the altar and they shrink away, so awful is the tragedy of his face. He lays his sword upon the altar.]

Hephæstion.

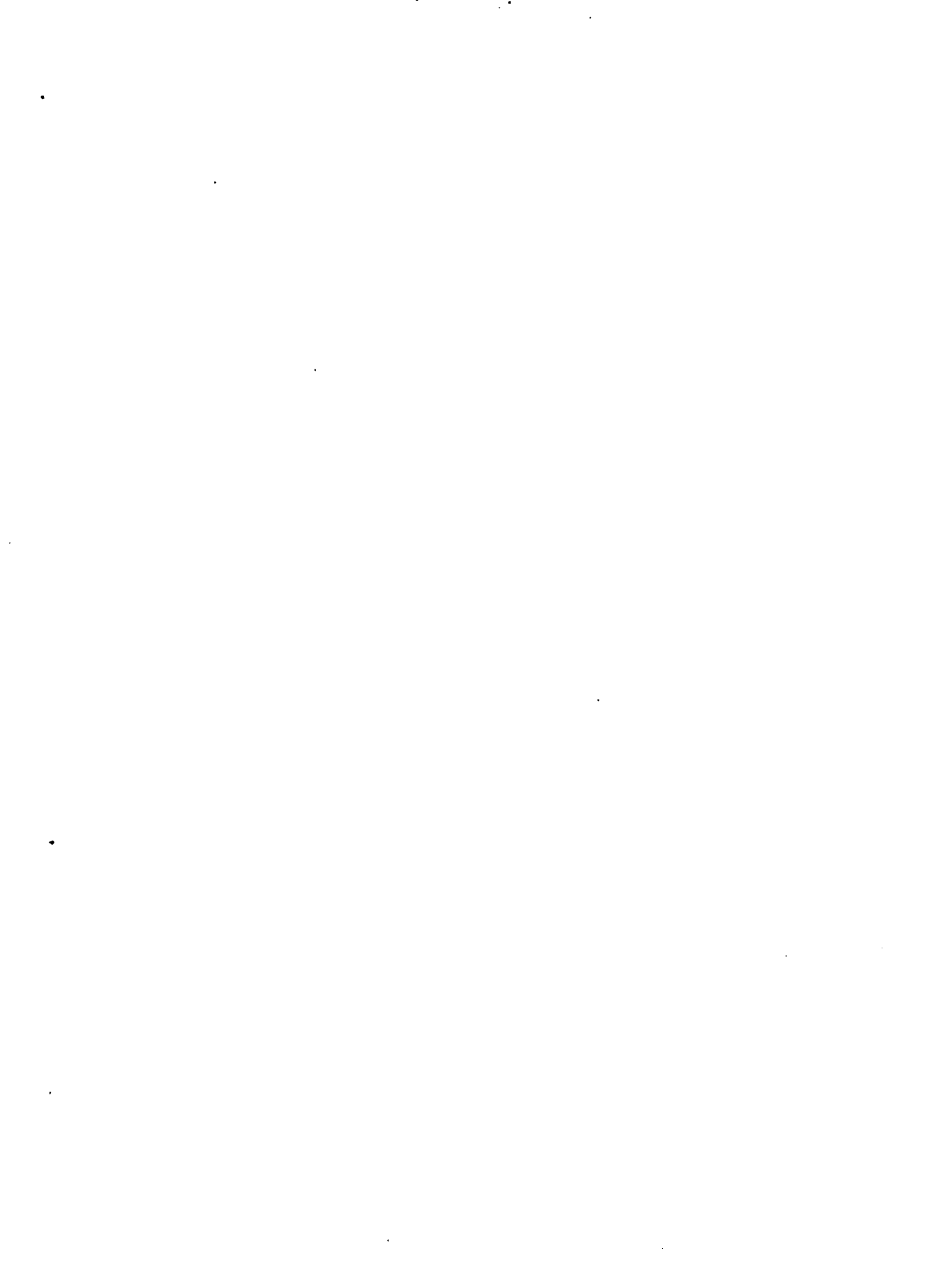
The Queen is dead. . . .

[A silence.]

CHORUS.

Inscrutable are they
That wield supernal power :
From depths of dark decay
They rear the splendid flower ;
On waste and fruitful soil
They spend the sun and rain ;
They lavish to despoil,
And wreck to raise again.

CURTAIN



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